

EDITORIAL

The Where, What, and Who of Feminist Foreign Policy: Hierarchies of Geography, Knowledge, and Power

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The year 2024 marked ten years since Sweden launched its avowedly “feminist” foreign policy (FFP). A decade on, states in the Global North and the Global South have either adopted feminist foreign policies or declared their intention to do so (see [Table 1](#) below). Major international conferences have been organized by the German (Berlin, 2022), Dutch (The Hague, 2023), Mexican (Mexico City, 2024), and French governments (Paris, 2025). Discussions of FFP have also become a regular fixture on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and the United Nations’ annual meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women. Regional bodies, such as the European Union and the EU-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation, have also hosted large events.

Yet, as quickly as its profile has risen, FFP has also begun to recede from view. Sweden, Germany, Argentina, and the Netherlands have all rescinded their policies or intentions in that regard, and their future in places like Canada looks increasingly uncertain (Leclerc 2025). Set against a global backdrop of rising authoritarianism and the erosion of liberal norms, including gender equality, FFP’s once prominent position as a state-led approach to addressing global inequalities is increasingly precarious.

Despite these setbacks, feminist scholars and activists laud the turn to feminism in foreign policy and its potential to transform the international system. In addition, civil society continues to respond positively to more feminism in foreign policy, operating within an emergent “FFP industry,” comprising nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), consultants, academics, and grassroots organizations, mostly concentrated in the Global North (see Haastrup, 2025). While

Table 1. Feminist foreign policy (FFP) adopting/declaring states with key details

Country	Details of States' Approach to FFP	FFP Policy Framework Document?	New Institutional Mechanism?	Rollback?
Sweden	In 2014, Sweden announced the first FFP through its architect, social democrat Margot Wällström, the then Foreign Minister.	Yes	No	Yes
Canada	While Canada followed Sweden down the path of feminism in foreign policy by announcing a Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in 2015, the intention to develop a full FFP was made in 2017 but none has been forthcoming at the time of writing.	Partially	No	No
Luxembourg	In 2018, the government included its intention to pursue a feminist foreign policy in its program of work. A full policy did not emerge beyond subsequent reinforcements to gender equality in foreign policy.	No	No	Yes
France	Initial press release from the French government on the adoption of a Feminist Diplomacy, its FFP was made in 2019. Since, an international strategy for FFP has been published	Yes	Yes	No
Mexico	Adopted in January 2020 following initial commitment declared at the UN General Assembly by Mexican in 2019.	No	No	No
Spain	In 2021, Spain announced its adoption of FFP via the publication of its FFP strategy.	Yes	Yes	No
Libya	Despite an initial announcement by Libya's first female foreign minister of the intention to adopt an FFP during the Generation Equality Forum, none has been forthcoming, however.	No	No	N/A
Germany	Initial plans were announced in November 2021 by the then left-of-center German coalition government. A full FFP was adopted in 2023.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chile	Following an initial declaration of intent in 2022, Chile adopted its FFP in June 2023.	Yes	No	No
Colombia	Announcement in March 2022 at the Committee on the Status of Women, UN Headquarters, New York	Yes	Yes	No

(Continued)

Table 1. *Continued*

Country	Details of States' Approach to FFP	FFP Policy Framework Document?	New Institutional Mechanism?	Rollback?
The Netherlands	In November 2022, the then government announced it was working on an FFP.	No	No	Yes
Slovenia	Announcement in March 2023 by the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, International Women's Day.	No	No	No
Argentina	Announcement in January 2023 in the National Gazette on the creation of an FFP minister and intention to adopt.	No	Yes	Yes
Scotland	Initial commitment in the Scottish Nationalist Party's 2021 election manifesto, followed by a Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR) in 2023	Yes	No	No
Liberia	Initial intention noted in 2022. Formal government announcement of a future gender-responsive foreign policy leaning on the FFP moment at the African Union annual summit	No	No	No

there are organizations based in the Global South, particularly in Latin America¹ and Africa,² Anglophone, Northern-based civil society continues to dominate the field in terms of visibility, government access, and funding (Philipson Garcia and Velasco Ugalde 2025; Haastrup 2025). This dominance is significant, especially when considered in the broader context of anti-gender politics, shrinking civil society space, and drastic aid cuts.

Academics, advocates, policy, and independent analysts have produced a significant body of work on FFP, informing both its meaning and its future direction. Yet FFP, and the states that have currently adopted it, are also strongly critiqued. Key points of contention include their relatively narrow interpretations of “feminism” (Aggestam and Rosamond 2019; Thomson 2020; Zhukova 2023) and how little difference being an FFP state has made to foreign policy responses to conflict, genocide, and planetary crisis.

In this context, this special section brings together academics, practitioners, and activists to critically examine and assess FFP as a state practice. The

1 In Latin America, both Internacional Feminista, a collective based in Mexico, and PEFAL (Política Exterior Feminista en América Latina), a regional organisation based in Chile, are actively engaged in the FFP space. For more on these groups, see Sepúlveda (2025)

2 The African Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AFIP Collective) was formed in 2022. For more information, see Haastrup (2025).

contributions include three research articles and five Notes from the Field, which collectively demonstrate that global hierarchies of power and knowledge shape the contours and boundaries of FFP. They do so by asking questions like: Why do some states adopt FFP? What feminisms are included and excluded in FFPs and with what constitutive political effects? How does the Global South/Global Majority contribute to the discourses and praxis of FFP? How do civil society organizations engage with FFP? And how do race, racism, and coloniality manifest in the articulation and implementation of FFP?

This editorial offers a roadmap for readers by taking stock of the first decade of FFP scholarship and practice. First, we outline where FFP is adopted and briefly discuss the processes behind its uptake. Second, we review the published literature on FFP to map the key actors shaping FFP knowledge production. Third, we consider the politics and power surrounding this knowledge alongside the emergence of an “FFP industry,” exploring the pace and nature of what is being produced about feminism in foreign policy. Fourth, we reflect on how the contributions to this special section begin to respond to the questions raised above.

Where Is FFP?

As Table 1 illustrates, FFP first emerged in Western Europe with Sweden’s announcement in 2014. Canada made a rhetoric statement in 2015 and later adopted a written policy in 2017, although this focused solely on international assistance not foreign policy more generally. From 2018 onward, a number of other states followed, including France, Luxembourg, and Mexico, the first adopter from the Global South. Between 2019 and 2024, there was a flurry of further declarations including adoptions or intentions: Spain, Libya, Germany, Chile, Colombia, the Netherlands, Liberia, Scotland, Slovenia, and Argentina. Mongolia and Bolivia have similarly engaged closely with FFP states articulating a preference for this sort of foreign policy approach. This expansion significantly widened the “FFP club,” bringing in states from four continents across the Global North and South.

However, as Table 1 further demonstrates, not all states have an FFP framework document. Instead, many countries prefer to articulate their commitments through a range of strategies and foreign policy practices. As Thomson and Wehner (2025) argue, states have come to adopt FFP for a variety of reasons, but key to those adoptions has been the role of critical actors within national administrations (notably Margot Wallström in Sweden) and the zeitgeist that feminism was experiencing in the 2010s, particularly in the Western world. Notable, too, is the fact that many states’ FFPs build on existing, long-standing commitments to gender equality and human rights in their international policy.

FFP Scholarship: Developing Specialized Knowledge

Parallel to these developments, FFP scholarship has proliferated in the last decade. Sweden’s announcement sparked a spate of publications, as scholars

and practitioners sought to make sense of this feminist “turn” in foreign policy, initially produced by Sweden-based academics (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Bergman Rosamond and Aggestam 2019; Bergman Rosamond and Hedling 2022; Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Kronsell. 2019; Jezierska 2021; Karlsson 2021; Sundström and Elgström 2020; Sundström, Zhukova and Elgström 2021; Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård 2024; Zhukova 2021; 2023; Zhukova, Sundström, and Elgström 2021). This literature quickly extended beyond the Swedish state as more countries adopted FFPs (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Cheung and Scheyer 2024; Duriesmith 2018; Tiessen and Swan 2018). Canada’s announcement in 2017 that it was adopting a feminist International Development Policy, for example, saw a similar emergence of literature from Canada-based academics (Aylward and Brown 2020; Beaulieu 2025; Cadesky 2020; Chapnick 2019; Husband-Ceperkovic and Tiessen 2020; Mason 2019; Morton, Muchiri, and Swiss 2020; Parisi 2020; Rao and Tiessen 2020; Smith and Ajadi 2020; Swan 2020; Tiessen, Smith, and Swiss 2020; Vucetic 2017).

Much of this literature questions what is specifically *feminist* about FFP as well as calling attention to certain hypocrisies of FFP states. The research highlights policy and conceptual deficits, including limited understandings of gender, particularly in relation to ideas around race, coloniality, and intersectionality (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Aylward and Brown 2020; Zhukova 2023; Guerrina, Haastrup, and Wright 2023; Mason 2019; Morton et al. 2020). FFP countries have been critiqued for advancing a neoliberal economic agenda within their policies, which does little to address structural inequalities (Achilleos-Sarll 2025; Parisi 2020; Thomson 2020) or the climate emergency (Cohn and Duncanson 2023).

Additionally, most FFP states neglect to mention the impact of their colonial pasts on their foreign policy (Färber and Standke-Erdmann 2025), including how these policies may promote ideas of “good” Western states and “bad” others, who require tutelage or rescuing (Cheung and Scheyer 2024). Other criticism focuses on the active silences and inactions of FFP states, including around issues like migration (Welfens, Popovic, and Mühlenhoff 2025) and in relation to conflict in Sudan and genocide in Palestine.

The fact that the initial wave of scholarly work on FFP focused on Sweden and Canada mirrors the dominance and access of Global North-based scholars—including ourselves—to academic institutions and funding opportunities. The institutional geography of FFP analysis is thus highly uneven. More recent scholarship takes a comparative focus (Sundström et al. 2021; Thomson 2020; 2022; Towns et al. 2024; Zhukova 2023; Zhukova et al. 2021) and there is growing attention to other parts of the world (see Färber and Standke-Erdmann 2025; Sepúlveda Soto 2025; and Thomson and Wehner 2025).

Furthermore, the disproportionate focus on its normative elements has meant that limited consideration has been paid to the institutional implications of FFP adoption, for example, in terms of what impact the creation of new Ambassadorial positions on FFP has had, or how the adoption of FFP changes working cultures within Foreign Ministries. We also know relatively little about FFP implementation, given minimal data about the outcomes of existing FFP policies (Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska 2023). Significantly, work on FFP mostly emanates from scholars whose expertise has been situated within

feminist international relations. There has been much less engagement from international development scholars (for an exception, see Tiessen 2024), despite the focus on development in many FFP states.

Who Does FFP?

FFP in the Global North

The position of Western European countries that have championed FFP has been reinforced by grand FFP summitry, in the form of four annual FFP conferences that have been held in Berlin, the Hague, Mexico City, and Paris. Of the countries that have produced comprehensive written policies outlining what shape their FFP will take, which were all published simultaneously in English translations, the majority are also situated in Europe, notably Spain, Germany, Scotland, and Sweden.

Mirroring this, civil society organizing and advocacy around FFP is also concentrated in the Global North. The first organization dedicated to FFP was the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, founded in 2016. Originally based in the United Kingdom, from 2018 until 2025 it had a Berlin office. The Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative, founded in 2023, is based out of the United States. The International Centre for Research on Women, located in Washington, D.C., hosts the quantitative Feminist Foreign Policy Index, which launched in 2023. The International Women's Development Agency, based in Melbourne, Australia, has produced major reports charting the global trajectory of FFP (see Ridge et al. 2024). Significant civil society energy and attention around FFP can thus be mapped in the Anglophone Global North. These partners have tended to be “the face” of civil society for governments wanting to partner with feminist organizations in the development of their FFP praxis (Philipsen Garcia and Velasco Ugalde 2025).

FFP in Latin America and Africa

Yet to describe FFP as a Global North enterprise would be misleading. The Global South is pushing FFP innovation. In Latin America, for instance, Mexico was lauded as the first Global South country to adopt an FFP. This status facilitated its hosting of the third FFP summit (the first outside Europe) in 2024. Similarly, Chile and Colombia have adopted FFP, with the latter installing its first-ever Roving Ambassador for Gender Affairs and Global Feminist Policy. Argentina, too, appeared to embrace FFP until the election victory of President Javier Milei in late 2023. Like Colombia and prior to Milei's ascension, Argentina appointed an ambassador for FFP signaling institutionalization.

Outside of Latin America, and also in the Global South, there has been limited uptake of FFP, although cases like Mongolia and Liberia bear reflection. While Asia has found little appeal in FFP, Mongolia has somewhat embraced the discourse. In 2023, Mongolia's government hosted a meeting of female foreign ministers in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, focused on discussing FFP. This meeting yielded the Ulaanbaatar Declaration, which committed to enhancing women's leadership and participation to address global challenges (Stamm 2023). Over the same time period, Liberia has courted the idea of FFP, albeit in a more muted

manner. Liberia does not use the feminist label, but has actively championed the importance of feminist principles like gender equality across “governance, peace-building, and socio-economic policies,” with an active commitment in February 2025 to integrate feminist principles in foreign policy (Dodoo 2025). As such, it is an advocate for gender-responsiveness as an approach to foreign policy.

FFP and Multilateralism

Beyond specific countries, multilateral sites also engage with FFP. Since 2019, the annual meeting of the Committee on the Status of Women at UN headquarters in New York has become an important space to follow emerging FFP discourses, particularly civil society perspectives. Also, at the UN, in 2023, the Feminist Foreign Policy Group (FFP+ Group) was formed with a rotating leadership of two annual Chairs. The FFP+ Group, formed as a coalition group within the UN, aimed at including aspirations of FFP in multilateral diplomacy. Open to both formal FFP adopters and aligned states, the group ostensibly legitimizes FFP within international institutions with the aim of fostering cross-regional collaboration.

Beyond the UN, FFP discussions have occurred at other multilateral spaces, including the annual Paris Peace Forum and the G7 Summits. Advocates of FFP argue that feminist policies provide a pathway toward the democratization, and ultimate transformation, of multilateral praxis, including how multilateral institutions work. This, it is posited, may then lead to “more inclusive and equitable outcomes” (Papworth 2024, 1). Yet, these multilateral spaces remain dominated by mostly Global North-based and/or -funded actors, calling into question the extent to which FFP transforms prevailing hierarchies within the international system.

Notwithstanding the positive reception of FFP in international spaces, the FFP approach remains fraught with tensions that challenge its liberatory potential in global politics. A key concern lies in the question of influence—namely, which actors shape FFP discourse and practice and whose feminism is legitimized. As we have shown, FFP is dominated by states from Western Europe, and FFP spaces are shaped by entrenched global power hierarchies. The privileging of English as the dominant language invariably marginalizes diverse feminist knowledges and traditions. As several contributions to this special section show, the extent to which emancipatory feminisms inform these policies is limited, raising important questions about whether FFP can disrupt global systems of oppression or merely reproduce them in new forms. This is particularly evident when assessing the FFP+ group, for instance. With the inclusion of countries like Israel, there are justifiable critiques about the credibility of FFP as a meaningful platform for advancing feminist internationalism, and even whether FFP is being used to mask war crimes. Coupled with the growing backlash against feminism, FFP is not in the best of health. Yet its role in setting an alternative direction for foreign policy cannot be disputed.

The Contributions

Set against this backdrop, the articles in this special section explore FFP in the context of knowledge production and practice. The contributions include both

research articles and Notes from the Field by authors who include both academics and practitioners. As a group, the articles speak to and acknowledge the hierarchies of knowledge production reflected by the dominance of the Global North. Yet, this collection seeks to expand that dominant knowledge of FFP beyond the usual intellectual sites and geographies. These articles also explore FFP engagements with grassroots and NGOs, as well as governmental and supranational actors.

Thomson and Wehner (2025) compare Sweden and Chile's FFPs to understand the states' motivation for adoption. They argue that a range of initiating factors, including the role of policy entrepreneurs, political windows of opportunity, and favorable environments for gender equality, inform adoption processes. Their analysis takes the existing FFP scholarship beyond identifying the normative shift in foreign policy to developing a framework that examines FFP uptake (and potentially conditions for its retraction).

While the feminist basis for FFP is not incontrovertible, postcolonial and decolonial feminist engagements and their broader implications for FFP praxis remain limited. Färber and Standke-Erdmann (2025) thus present a timely contribution through their postcolonial analysis. They show that although the German FFP discourse seeks to project a reflective, responsible, ethical state, in reality, this only serves to erase the coloniality of Germany's foreign policy structures undermining claims that FFP can challenge existing power structures of global politics.

Similarly, Welfens, Popovic, and Mühlenhoff (2025) explore the absence of migration in the German approach to FFP. Drawing on practice theory to untangle the relationship between civil society and the institutional architecture within which FFP resides, the authors demonstrate how a lack of attention to race and gender informs this absence that invariably makes for an exclusionary FFP.

The Notes from the Field move the focus of FFP beyond the global North, expanding what we know about FFP from the perspective of the global majority. Haastrup (2025) charts African feminists' engagement with FFP as one riven with tensions and contestations. Sepúlveda (2025), a cofounder of the Platform for Feminist Foreign Policy in Latin America (PEFAL), explores the evolution of FFP in the Chilean context, which has so far received limited attention. Philipson Garcia and Velasco Ugalde (2025) turn to the case of Mexico also highlighting contestations concerning the reproduction of foreign policy hierarchies within the global FFP community.

Balbon and Christiansen (2025) show how the competitive, precarious, and fraught funding environment demonstrates a disjuncture between FFP rhetoric and action from major donor governments which, as Haastrup (2025) also argues, is a consequence of the professionalization of FFP. As Leclerc (2025) further shows, enthusiasm and willingness toward FFP do not always yield results. For example, Canada, the second country to have a version of FFP through its FIAP, has stalled on progress due to institutional inertia.

More than a decade after Sweden's pivot to FFP, it stands at a crossroads. Sweden and others have rolled back their commitments, abandoning feminism in foreign policy entirely even as the initial step toward feminism in foreign policy continues to be celebrated for their normative ambition. This special

section traces the evolution of FFP across diverse geographies, actors, and institutional settings, highlighting how power hierarchies continue to shape both the discourse and practices of foreign policy including FFP. The contributions critically interrogate the knowledge structures that sustain FFP's emergence.

While there is undeniable innovation especially from the Global South, the dominance of Global North actors risks reinforcing the very inequalities FFP supposedly seeks to challenge. In curating voices from across scholarly, policy, and activist spaces, this special section underscores that FFP is more than a policy label: it is also an entry point for feminist praxis in global politics. Whether FFP can live up to its radical promise will remain a pressing question as it enters its next decade.

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